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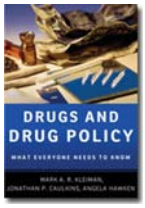
Drug Dilemmas

BY CRAIG REINARMAN

DRUGS AND DRUG POLICY: WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW

By Mark A.R. Kleiman, Jonathan P. Caulkins, and Angela Hawken
New York (NY): Oxford University Press, 2011
234 pp., $16.95



These are not happy days for drug prohibition. The United States has the world's highest incarceration rate—in large part because of the more than 500,000 drug offenders currently in prison. More than 700,000 citizens are arrested annually for marijuana possession. Some 60,000 Mexicans have been killed in drug war violence. Yet the flow of drugs is unimpeded. Sixteen thousand Americans died of overdoses last year, and teen drug use remains little affected.

During the past two decades, activists created syringe exchange programs in 150 US cities to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. Medical marijuana laws have been passed in nineteen states and Washington, D.C. Voters in Colorado and Washington passed marijuana legalization. And polls show that a majority of Americans support these trends. Reformers have forced open the space for a real drug policy debate.

The authors of *Drugs and Drug Policy: What Everyone Needs to Know* use this space to expose myths, speak inconvenient truths, and nudge the debate away from ideology toward evidence. The reader wouldn't know it from the book's clichéd cover: marijuana with a pipe, a razor blade with chopped lines of cocaine, and the predictable pile of cash—all presented like a still life of a cartel kingpin's coffee table. But the text inside paints a more nuanced picture of a world where damage from legal drugs dwarfs that from illicit drugs. The authors are refreshingly candid about the trade-offs and limitations of drug policy, and through a series of brief answers to 143 questions, they provide a well-written and generally fair-minded summary of the vast literatures bearing on drug problems.

According to the authors, "most people who use abusable drugs do so in a reasonably controlled fashion," while most "of the roughly 3 million dependent users...are struggling," poor, and "criminally active." The authors add, however, that "policies shape the risks": The links between hard drug abuse, poverty, and property crime are largely "a consequence of illegality."

Legalization would decrease crime, but the authors also believe it would yield unacceptable increases in drug abuse. However, that has not happened under decriminalization policies in the Netherlands and Portugal. This argument assumes that legalization leads only to an unregulated market, but that is not what most reformers propose.

The authors do not focus on culture, character, and everyday-life engagements that keep most drug users from addiction—nor the trauma, pain, and deprivation that underlie most hard cases. Instead, they generally see drug users as *homo economicus* for whom prices determine demand. They recognize the value, and the limitations, of all types of treatment. And they offer many ideas on how to make treatment more effective, although their favorite is to jail addicts when they slip up in treatment.

The book wisely acknowledges that law enforcement has limits and that conventional supply reduction strategies are based on "the illusion that the drug problem is caused by the drugs...rather than by the desire for those drugs." Yet they remain comfortable with a range of repressive measures, including drug testing employees to deter "off the job drug use" and reengineering addicts' immune systems to block drugs, as long as those measures are "effective."

Reasonable people can disagree about how to balance efficacy and the basic rights of drug-using citizens; however, these questions become more pressing when race is considered. Late in the book, the authors admit that racial fears have been detrimental to rational drug policy and that punitive prohibition has had a racially disparate impact. Yet they argue that this is not because of institutional racism, but because African American dealers more often sell drugs on the street, where they are more vulnerable to arrest. This ignores all of the other ways in which discrimination is baked into drug law enforcement. The authors do acknowledge that "spending $200,000 on incarceration to punish a $250 transaction" is absurd.

The book ends with three sets of recommendations. A "consensus list" includes focusing treatment on those most in need and expanding opiate substitution therapy. A "pragmatist list" 1suggests: "Stop punishing former dealers and recovering addicts" by denying access to services and higher education; lock up fewer people; and embrace harm reduction strategies. And the "bridge too far list" contains higher taxes on alcohol, regulated marijuana sales, and research on the many potential benefits of banned drugs. The authors give no overall conclusion, but a line from the first chapter works for this reviewer: "Drug control thus resembles drug tak-

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ing: all well and good in moderation, but liable to slide into harmful excess." ■

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